

LET TONARIGUMI DO IT

By LILY ABEGG

Those foreigners who have known Japan in former days have almost certainly never heard the word "Tonarigumi," and will wonder what kind of a new invention this may be. On all sides one hears it mentioned. One is told that Tonarigumi is "the lowest political cell in the new structure of Japan," or one hears that Tonarigumi obtains the ration cards for sugar, is responsible for air raid precautions, organizes send-off escorts for soldiers going to the front, or distributes cooking recipes. It seems to be a real maid-of-all-work.

A SONG AND A DANCE

If the foreigner finds himself at a geisha party he will see, among the many old and new songs and dances, a performance of the Tonarigumi dance to the melody of the Tonarigumi song. The Japanese have a craze for everything new and topical and are therefore always ready to participate in or celebrate a new fashion. The past year produced new song hits inspired by air raid precautions, the China incident, the new reform movement, and many other things. No wonder that the new neighborhood leagues are also immediately taken up in songs and dances. The Tonarigumi song, translated into English, goes something like this:

Knock, knock, knock on the door
For we're the neighbors' guild,
When the door is opened
'Tis the face of friends we see.
Please, my neighbor pass around
The notification board,
So we may tell to others
What we have been told.

Knock, knock, knock on the door
For we're the neighbors' guild,
Help for this and help for that

"Miso Shooyu."

Telling how to boil the rice,
While gossiping o'er the fence,
Teaching to other neighbors,
Also being taught.

Knock, knock, knock on the door
For we're the neighbors' guild,
Help in earthquake, lightning, thunder,
Fire and catching thieves,
Giving every mutual aid
And being the watch-dog,
Giving our aid to others,
Also being helped.

Knock, knock, knock on the door
For we're the neighbors' guild,
No matter what the number
We're a single family,
Hearts the same just like the moon
Which shines down on the roofs,
Having our troubles solved
And solving others' too.

The dance to this song represents, in the beautiful, graceful figures of Japanese dancing, the humorous side of neighborly help, whereby neighborhood gossip is, of course, not forgotten. The song and dance are performed by two geishas who, after much ado and whispering, make a pretty picture as they merrily go off arm in arm.

WHAT IS TONARIGUMI?

But what is Tonarigumi? In short it is the association of usually ten neighboring families for mutual assistance and for the carrying out of various public duties. Heading this neighborhood league is the Tonarigumicho, the leader or chief, who is assisted by an acting-leader. Several such leagues are combined in city blocks, these again in districts, the districts in boroughs, and at the head of the boroughs there is a city leader. All leading posts are honorary. In the case

of the Tonarigumis—the ten-family leagues themselves—as well as in the case of blocks and districts, the leaders are almost always private citizens, while the highest positions are usually administered by officials in addition to their regular posts. In this way the Mayor of Tokyo is at the same time the city leader of the neighborhood leagues. In Tokyo, with its five million inhabitants, there are 108,000 Tonarigumis.

One cannot understand the spirit of the Tonarigumis or the scope of their duties without knowing something about their origin. These leagues appeared simultaneously in different places after the outbreak of the China conflict, when living conditions began to get more difficult. The stimulus for them went out from the semi-official "Bureau for Spiritual Mobilization" formed in 1938. The idea was, however, taken up so readily and quickly that one can almost speak of a spontaneous national movement. This would hardly have been possible if it had been a question of something entirely new. The Tonarigumis link up with a tradition interrupted many years ago; for in former centuries there were very similar organizations in Japan. It speaks for the feeling for tradition and the active historical sense of the Japanese people that in the present critical period it remembered a proven organization of olden times that had apparently been long forgotten.

AN OLD IDEA

The system of neighborhood leagues was introduced in Japan as early as the seventh century in connection with the Taikwa reforms. It originated in China, where at that time every five families (or rather family clans), combined in neighborhood associations, formed the cells of the state. These associations were called *Go-ho* in Japan, which means "provision of safety among five (families)." The *Go-ho* were responsible for questions of economy and for the maintenance of peace and safety. Later these associations temporarily lost their importance in Japan—as in China—because the families and clans

regained the ascendancy. In both countries the state had introduced these very associations as a counterweight against the growing power of the family clans. Through the neighborhood associations the state attempted to cultivate a community spirit not based exclusively on family bonds.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Tokugawa Shoguns, who succeeded in uniting and pacifying the whole country, again introduced this system, at that time maintained by only a few of the princes, with some modifications in all of Japan. These *Goningumi* (five men associations) also had economic and political duties. The leader of the *Goningumi* was a sort of connecting link between the people and the government and had multifarious duties, from settling quarrels to selling land and collecting taxes. He had also to see to it that individual clans did not become powerful enough again to oppose the rule of the Shoguns.

During the Meiji period these *Goningumi*, together with most other traditional organizations, were abolished in the course of the great changes of that time. Three quarters of a century later they have now come to life again. It is significant that this time they were not solely created or decreed from "above"—perhaps to keep the families under control, or with some other political intention—but grew spontaneously out of the population. The "Bureau for Spiritual Mobilization" had after all no legal power to enforce the creation of Tonarigumis; it could only offer suggestions and encouragement.

CHINA HAS THEM TOO

It is interesting in this connection that in China too, in 1935 and 1936, these almost forgotten associations were revived under the name of *Pao-chia* (responsible headman, or guarantor) organizations. It was Chiang Kai-shek who introduced them, after the dispersion of the Communists, in the war-torn provinces of Central China with the aim of ensuring peace, security, and reconstruction. At the time they were sponsored mainly for political reasons.

The headman of each association had to guarantee that there were no Communist elements among its members. Wang Ching-wei has also recently reintroduced this long proven Far Eastern organization. In a model district established by the Nanking Government near Soochow—about halfway between Nanking and Shanghai—which contains about 200,000 people, the *Pao-chia* are to be the basic cells for peace, security, and reconstruction.

The Tonarigumis first made their appearance in Tokyo and then in a few other large cities. In the country, where there had always been a sort of neighborly help and village community spirit, there was less reason for their creation. Hence today the Tonarigumi organizations are more developed in the large cities than in smaller towns and in the country. However, the spreading of Tonarigumis over the whole of Japan is only a question of time.

At first hardly taken seriously, especially in intellectual circles, the Tonarigumis soon attracted the interest of the Government to an increasing extent. On behalf of individual families they undertook the despatch of economic and other questions, so that in the end the public services found it more convenient to make use of these leagues.

RATION CARDS,

AIR RAIDS, AND EVACUATION

Today the distribution of rationed foodstuffs and other goods is carried out everywhere by the Tonarigumis or similar rural organizations. Rationing has not been uniformly regulated in Japan and differs in the various provinces and large cities. There are, for example, districts possessing enough charcoal (still the most important fuel in Japan), and others where there is a scarcity of this commodity, so that the consumption must be regulated. Today in Tokyo and other large cities the Tonarigumis take care of the distribution of sugar, matches, charcoal and coal, rice, flour, edible oil, towels, and rice wine. The rationing of fish, meat, and soya bean sauce (which takes the

place of our fats) is about to come into force. In several places the Tonarigumis, when required, also handle the distribution of cotton, bandages, and other articles as soon as a shortage is felt.

Furthermore the Tonarigumis form the backbone of the air raid precautions system. The Tonarigumi-cho is at the same time an air raid warden, and his neighborhood league is obliged to provide auxiliary forces for fire fighting, salvage work, etc.

The evacuation of large cities and other dangerous areas, to be provided in an emergency for children under fourteen and all persons over sixty, is being prepared by the Tonarigumis. Many meetings have already taken place in the Tonarigumis and among their leaders to discuss the best methods of evacuation.

In other respects, however, the range of duties for the Tonarigumis is not uniformly regulated. According to the initiative of the members it can extend to all kind of things, such as mutual aid in cases of illness, labor shortage (where men have been conscripted), or, on the contrary, unemployment. There are Tonarigumis that make wholesale purchases to save money, that send off packages to the front, that rent empty building sites to plant vegetables. Practically all of them hitherto provided escorts at funerals, weddings, and for departing and returning soldiers. Recently, however, this custom has been greatly curtailed in the general trend towards simplicity and economy.

A BUSY MAN

The Tonarigumi-cho is a very busy man, for all his work is done in an honorary capacity in addition to his regular job. He is responsible for the just distribution of articles of daily need and for making public the official regulations in question. In order to save paper he pastes one copy on a wooden board—so that the paper will not tear—and sends this board from family to family. The Tonarigumi-cho is usually the owner of a shop, a bookseller, hardware dealer or something similar. In any case he must be a man who works

mainly at his home and is not occupied the whole day at an office or in a large business house. The meetings of a neighborhood league take place in the houses of all ten families in turn. Only the heads of each household—usually the head of the family—take part in the meeting, but of course they can also send their wives, brothers or sons as their representatives if they are too busy to come themselves. In a suburb of Tokyo there is even a German Tonarigumi-cho, probably the only foreigner to have been given this honor.

WOMEN'S SHARE

As the men are often out or at their place of work and as furthermore mostly household questions are dealt with, women occupy a very prominent place in the Tonarigumis. For the Japanese woman, whose life had hitherto been limited to the family and household, the neighborhood leagues are on the whole a welcome change and innovation. They can now have discussions in meetings, have an opportunity to meet new people, and may even have their say in such important public affairs as distribution of food, evacuation, etc. With this the Japanese woman has suddenly begun to come out into the open. This is a healthy and natural development, for in the long run Japan can hardly get along without some co-operation on the part of women. This has already become apparent during the last few years, when many women have had to take the places of their husbands conscripted for war service.

Meeting the neighbors is a new experience not only for the women but for all Japanese city dwellers. Under similar circumstances as in the belligerent countries of Europe people are now being brought together who formerly hardly knew each other by sight. Japanese circles are right in pointing out that the Tonarigumis, even if they had not been dissolved, could not have flourished during the last fifty years, as they did not fit into that liberal period. Without a community spirit neighborhood leagues are impossible.

CELLS FOR A NEW STRUCTURE

In the pyramid-like structure of the neighborhood organizations the center of gravity lies in the ten-family leagues, that is in the real Tonarigumis. They are so to speak the soul of the whole; this is where the daily life of the people pulses, and the willing co-operation of the neighbors is the only warrant for the neighborhoods' satisfactory and beneficial working in the future. Although as yet the Tonarigumi-cho has nothing to do with political affairs, it seems to be in the nature of present developments for the neighborhood leagues to be gradually incorporated in the political structure of Japan. From a legal point of view the nature of the Tonarigumis is still unclear; they can be considered neither as purely private organizations nor as public bodies.

For the present the Tonarigumi organizations meet the Government organizations halfway, so to speak, and the contact points in the large cities are the boroughs and in smaller towns the municipal administration. The food ration cards, for example, are given out in Tokyo at the borough halls to the leaders of the neighborhood leagues of these boroughs. These leaders, and no other municipal or government organs, hand on the cards to the districts, blocks, and Tonarigumis. Due to the personal union existing between the highest leaders of the neighborhood leagues and the higher officials of the municipal or local administration, there is a close contact between the wishes and suggestions coming from below and the desires of the Government.

Of all the innovations that have come into existence in Japan the Tonarigumis are without question among the most successful. They will decidedly play a part, in one way or another, in the future of the country, for they represent an organization that has already proved its reality and that will, I am sure, be characteristic of the new political structure of Japan.